DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 184 156 CS 502 831

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TITLE Child Abuse Reporting: An Agenda-Setting Paradigm for Community Attitude Change.
PUB DATE Feb 80
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association (Portland, OR, February 16-20, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitude Change; *Behavior Change; Change Strategies; *Child Abuse; *Community Action; *Community Involvement; Information Dissemination; *Mass Media; Parent Child Relationship; Social Problems; Social Responsibility
IDENTIFIERS *Agenda Setting

ABSTRACT

An attitude change campaign using an interpersonal and mass media strategy for agenda-setting could be used to elicit community understanding of child-abusing parents from a therapeutic rather than a punitive perspective, thereby improving the handling of this social problem. An outline of such a campaign would include phases of surveying the problem, agenda setting, planning strategies for mass media and interpersonal campaigns, and the implementation of these strategies. In this way, the issue of reporting child abuse involves altering attitudes toward several objects: abusing parents, public reporting of a private event, legal ramifications, and the abused child. The major contribution of applying agenda setting theory to the problem of child abuse would be to provide suggestions for the methods and details that the media and community leaders would use in the campaign. (RL)

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CHILD ABUSE REPORTING: AN AGENDA-SETTING PARADIGM FOR COMMUNITY ATTITUDE CHANGE

A Paper Submitted to the
Western Speech Communication Association
For Consideration by the
Mass Communication Division
at the February 1980 WSCA Convention
Portland, Oregon

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ABSTRACT

Child Abuse Reporting: An Agenda-Setting Paradigm for Community Attitude Change

The topic of attitude change is not new in social science research, and neither is that of child abuse. Deviant behavior is a popular theme throughout the sociological and psychological literature today. It was the intent of this researcher to take advantage of the topicality of these two issues to develop a paradigm that would act as a model for a community attitude change campaign through the use of agenda-setting. In this case, the issue of child abuse reporting involves the altering of attitudes toward several objects: (1) abusing parents, (2) public reporting of a private event, (3) legal ramifications and (4) the abused child.

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of child abuse in society is obscured by culturally defined norms. The sanctity of traditional values such as that of personal property, invasion of privacy and children as possessions tends to promote and maintain an attitude of noninterference by family, neighbors, friends and the community. Child abuse can be checked only when these prohibitions are waived and community members take the responsibility of caring for all children. Community members must understand the abusing parent in a therapeutic rather than a punitive respect. Only in this way can individuals feel free to report abusive behavior and provide help for the abusing parents and the endangered child.

An attitude change campaign using an interpersonal and mass-media strategy for agenda-setting could be used to elicit this kind of understanding. The objective of the campaign would be to develop a new social definition of abusing parents as noncriminals and to create an awareness of the community's obligation to protect children. Altered attitudes toward the social issue of child abuse should increase abusive-behavior reporting to authorities, thus allowing the community to assess the scope of the problem. Once this information is known, the social service agencies could set up mechanisms to deliver protective and counseling services to those who need it. It is the purpose of this paper to outline a campaign that would provide this information.

BACKGROUND

In the last decade many researchers have dedicated themselves to the understanding, controlling and predicting of child-abusing behavior (Boehm, 1964; Downs, 1963; Heffler and Kempe, 1968; Johnson, 1973; Kadushin, 1967; Murdock, 1970). Although these studies have not directly addressed the behavior of child abuse reporting, it is a concomitant issue and one that needs to be addressed if the problem of child abuse is to be overcome. A review of some of the studies in the area provides a partial explanation of the neglect.

In a 1969 study of hospital emergency rooms, Kempe found that 10 percent of the children admitted were suspected cases of abuse but were not reported by the physician. Kempe suggested inadequate understanding by doctors of their responsibility to report. Earlier, Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegmueller and Silver (1962) investigated actual physicians' reports of suspected abuse and its outcomes. They found approximately one-third of the cases reported were diagnosed accurately and culminated in some kind of legal action. Both Gil (1969) and Kempe et al. (1962) found that the affected children were under three years of age and thus could not report the abuse themselves. Nagi (1974) found several reasons that adults other than the abusing parents did not report: (1) lack of knowledge about reporting requirements, (2) lack of resources and manpower, (3) red tape, (4) lack of confidence in child protective service agencies, (5)

private physicians not wanting to get involved and (6) protective service agencies refusing to report to a central registry because of organizational jealousy. Irwin (1974) said that the traditional reporting mechanism of calling the police or the social service agency was not adequate because reporting was not followed by action. Gil (1970) suggested that the only way to combat child abuse was to get a commitment from the American public for the well-being of its children. In a sociologically based study, Gil (1969) found the following cultural factors contributing to the problem of abuse: permissiveness toward the use of physical force in child-rearing, poverty, inadequate parenting and a punitive philosophy toward those who report abusers and abusing parents. Kempe (1969) stated that "child abuse . . . has nothing to do with race, color, creed, sex, income, education, or anything else" (p. 46); but as Steele (1970) contends, it is a result of "a violent child-rearing pattern firmly established in Western culture" (p. 2). Kempe (1969) pointed out that "as long as society believes parents have a right to inflict corporal punishment on their children, the consequences of serious injury must be expected" (p. 47). To support this claim, Kempe found that 90 percent of the abusing parents are neither psychotic or sociopathic. These culturally defined child-rearing practices coupled with the norms of personal property and invasion of privacy make any systematic effort to change these socially accepted standards of behavior difficult. Even so, the majority of reports about

abusive behavior come from neighbors who must choose between invading a person's privacy and living with the knowledge that a child is being seriously mistreated. Although this moral dilemma is perpetually present, reports from community members, such as neighbors, are needed not only to protect the child but to help assess the depth of the problem in the community.

Lindenthal wrote in 1975 that a city of 15,000 could be expected to have several reported cases of child abuse every year; thus cities meeting that population criterion which did not have reported cases of child abuse were experiencing the problem but had an inadequate reporting mechanism. There is no systematic way to know how widespread the problem is without accurate reporting, and without reports there can be no planned treatment.

With this in mind, I have developed an agenda-setting model for child abuse reporting using mass communication and interpersonal channels. It is my contention that by using mass media to set a public agenda for encouraging child abuse reporting, the cultural barriers can be overcome. As Douglas, Westley and Chaffee (1970) found, "public information campaigns can produce significant changes in attitudes and values on social issues" (p. 479).

THE CAMPAIGN

The sensitive subject of attitude change about child abuse could be approached through a public opinion campaign

using agenda-setting. The campaign would be conducted in three phases: (1) the survey phase, (2) the agenda-setting phase and (3) the mass-media and interpersonal-channel phase.

The campaign would make use of channels such as community leaders and the media to encourage abuse or suspected abuse reporting to child protection agencies by creating an awareness of the problem and setting a public agenda for the acceptance of reporting child abuse. According to Lindenthal (1975), a better educated public would be more aware of and thus more willing to use the helping services (counseling, crisis nurseries, hotlines). Until reporting is increased, social service agencies cannot plan adequate programs for the community.

SURVEY PHASE

The first phase of the campaign would involve public education. People are aware that children in the United States die from abuse each year but not that children in their own communities do so (Lindenthal, 1975). To bring this information before the public, a survey would be made in a community to review reports of child abuse received in that community and at the central registry for the state. A survey questionnaire, developed by Baade (1976), to assess the level of knowledge of the problem and the propensity to report would be administered to a sample population of the community.

The questionnaire was designed to assess (1) the degree to which people are aware of the general problem, (2) the number of people who have knowledge of or who actually have reported a case of abuse, (3) the attitudes of people about abusing parents, (4) people's knowledge of legal and ethical ramifications of reporting, (5) people's knowledge about reporting procedures, (6) the types of media in the area, (7) the general population characteristics and (8) identification of community leaders.

The information obtained from the survey eventually would be used to help create a media campaign geared to increase awareness of the prevalence of child abuse and the obligation to report, even at the risk of invading privacy. In short, the campaign would attempt to set child abuse on the public agenda.

AGENDA-SETTING

Maxwell McCombs (1975) stated that the media facilitate the learning of factual information and effecting cognitions of what to think about, i.e., agenda setting. McCombs commented, "Not only [do people] learn factual information about public affairs and what is happening in the world. They also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis placed on it by the mass media" (p. 3). However, as McCombs et al. (1975) suggest, the majority of research on agenda-setting has been applied in political sectors; thus, applications to child abuse cannot be direct.

To bring the insights of agenda-setting to the projected media campaign, the general findings of agenda-setting studies and some theoretical information must be considered. McCombs' (1975) work is useful in this respect. McCombs pointed out that the agenda-setting hypothesis basically asks how the press coverage influences our perceptions of objects and their attributes. In listing trends of agenda-setting, McCombs cited a lack of universal influence of agenda setting, contingent factors such as placement of the agenda on the front page versus inside pages of a newspaper, related personality factors that correlated with the agenda topic affecting perceptual impact, frequency of exposure (usually three to four months) and the individual's need to know. The interpersonal effects of peer group discussion also have been considered as important in keeping a topic on the public agenda.

A variety of studies on the two-step flow of communication or "interpersonal effects" (Robinson, 1972; McCombs and Snow, 1974; Donohew, Tichenor and Oline, 1972; and Chaffee, 1973) has emphasized the role played by opinion leaders and peer discussions in highlighting media messages. Chaffee (1973) claims that "in a very real way, a principal social function of the mass media may be to facilitate interpersonal discussion" (p. 98). The media-influenced public does not accept messages via a "hypodermic" transfusion direct from the television set; rather, the audience opinion leaders select topics or media items for public discussion

and evaluation--thus Chaffee's term, Interacting Audience.

McCombs (1975) cited three cumulative-effect models that show how the audience acquires the media agenda: awareness (knowing versus not knowing the information), priorities (media priorities on topicality transferred to public priorities), and salience (high and low importance decisions made by individuals--not a simple transferral of media priorities to public priorities). To apply awareness, priorities and salience models to the child abuse campaign, an attempt must be made to accumulate each model state on the public agenda: first, awareness of child abuse and neglect must be fostered in the locale (informational); second, child abuse prevention or treatment must become a community priority; and third, salience must be established by evoking community decisions about how much will be invested actively by individuals and community resources to prevent or treat abuse. Thus, the media investment in creating cumulative stages of agendas in a community must be fairly extensive over a period of several months.

Although agenda-setting researchers are beginning to consider individual, interpersonal and sociological effects of media in empirical testing of the agenda-setting hypothesis, no one to date has attempted the kind of reverse application intended in the child abuse campaign. Therefore, agenda-setting research can only go so far as a paradigm for a study. However, a study of community attitude change by Douglas, Westley and Chaffee (1970) has direct application to this proposed campaign.

Douglas, Estley and Chaffee conducted an experiment to test attitudinal changes through person-to-person contacts in an experimental community and a control community. The subject of the experimental study was similar to although not so socially controversial as child abuse: mental retardation with a goal of increasing community awareness and sponsoring a sheltered workshop.

The before-test questionnaire used by Douglas, Westley and Chaffee investigated knowledge of the subject (in this case, retardation) and media consumption, as does the child abuse survey. The nature of the retardation study and the needs of the child abuse campaign are surprisingly similar.

Douglas, Westley and Chaffee found some increase in public awareness after the campaign. More important, however, a significant attitude change was found in the experimental community. Local media sources were found to have a strong influence on attitude change while friends were the most often-cited source of information--the two-step flow effect (pp. 485-486). The authors concluded,

> An additional factor that this study suggests is important is the nature of the community. The small rural center of gemeinschaft America is often pictured as deeply resistant to social change. But for some kinds of issues, the small community, with its established institutions and lines of personal contact, may well be a better setting for an information campaign than a diversified, fragmented urban locale (p. 492).

MASS-MEDIA/INTERPERSONAL PHASES

Aspects of the agenda-setting research may be applied to the question of how agenda-setting can help in preparing a campaign on child abuse. Because the topic is one closely akin to taboo areas, a one-shot or continuous campaign would be unreliable (for example, the "something's wrong" commercials now being aired on national commercial spots) in soliciting voluntary group conversation. The most that could be expected would be comments indicating the consumption of the message along with comments such as "It's awful." The topic area of child abuse is different than anything tackled by agenda-setting to date because it strikes at moral and ethical questions that must ultimately rest on individual choice, which is quite different from the media-influencing public agendas. For example, Weaver and Spellman (1974) determined the effect of the media on knowledge of facts about Watergate and opinions about what should be done (decisions which at the time were determined largely by private ethics or moral considerations). These decisions are qualitatively different than the personal decisions and discriminatory information required by the child abuse topic.

The need-for-information effect also has ambiguous meanings for the child abuse campaign. Does the public feel the need to know about child abuse? Personal experience as an interviewer in a child abuse study suggests that the answer is no. Many persons are visibly afraid of the topic, and others beg the question by saying, "I would never do anything

like that." Neither attitude suggests that the public would seek information from the media concerning child abuse or would elevate information gained to a position of salience. The most prevalent attitude is that child abuse does not occur very frequently, but when it does it is overt action carried out by deranged people. To attain salience, a media campaign would first have to break down this commonly held maxim about who commits child abuse using a persuasive message campaign that abusers are people under stress who need assistance in relieving that stress.

A media campaign should attempt to activate the public on several planes. McCombs' awareness model applies here--persons must hold the proper information concerning what child abuse is, the legal ramifications and the reporting procedures. The salience model is also applicable--the campaign is designed to set child abuse prevention as a high-priority item on the public agenda. In addition to the two models presented by McCombs, the media campaign must also prepare the public to act on the salient information held concerning child abuse whenever a case is suspected, or to use preventative measures. The campaign would attempt both to set an informational agenda and to persuade the public to act on that agenda.

A typical campaign would start with a survey to determine those persons who are regarded as community leaders, media personalities and opinion leaders within ethnic, economic, religious and employment segments of the population.

Once the community leaders were pinpointed, their support could be enlisted prior to the media campaign to ensure verbal opinions concerning the need to report abuse. A one-day workshop sponsored by social service agencies encouraging community involvement in the campaign would help ensure success. The theme of the workshop would be that the community had the choice of making the campaign succeed or fail.

From these insights concerning agenda-setting and the goals of the public media campaign, it can be seen that agenda-setting can provide useful ways to plan such a campaign. The major contribution of agenda-setting is to provide suggestions for the methods and details of such a media/community leader campaign. Some possibilities are as follows:

1. A pre-media workshop of community leaders.

2. A persuasive information campaign over a four-to-five-month period.

3. The campaign should start in local newspapers with the wording varied and appropriately placed in different sections of the paper on an alternate-day basis.

4. Next, the campaign should use local radio public service spots voiced by community information leaders.

5. The local radio and television stations should sponsor talk shows on abuse in which local residents could call in and have questions clarified.

6. Schools and churches should be enlisted to carry information in later stages of the campaign.

7. There may be a need to have bilingual media spots, depending on the population of the community.

8. Radio spots should be aired in early morning and early evening to ensure full listenership.

9. During the first month of the campaign the newspaper messages should be informational. They should include definitions of abuse and some of the causes for the behavior. During the first month of the campaign these articles should be highly visible and appear frequently. Beginning with the second month, radio spots should contain appeals for action which emerge from community leaders.. These radio spots should continue throughout the campaign.

10. As interest increases, community leadership should be encouraged to seek federal funding and open a clinic independent of social services. The department of social services must emphasize that it does not have funding to give anything--the job is indeed the community's.

If a mix of media exposure and an interpersonal loosening on the topic could be implemented, one might hope for McComb's priority model to have effect. Although initiated by social services, the study would actually be community based--either cooperation is gained of community leaders or the campaign will fail. This plan does not follow direct agenda-setting theory; however, the campaign does seem potentially workable. The role of media in this campaign would be to support and energize the interpersonal level of interaction on a specific issue.

DISCUSSION

The primary beneficiaries of the successful implementation of this campaign proposal will be the clinetele to be served, namely those parents and children caught in abusive relationship patterns. Local social service staffs will benefit from the proposal through their increased usefulness to the community by providing needed services.

I believe that if the issue of children as the responsibility of the community can be placed above social prohibitions, reports of abuse will increase allowing social services to assess the extent of the problem and plan for treatment. Needless to say, field studies of this proposal will be the final test of its worth.

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